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How and why are people using Twitter: A small group study

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Information Sheet

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings from a survey of people who are using Twitter. Twitter feels like the new technology on the learning technology block. When viewed in terms of the Gartner Hype Cycle then it would be classified as moving towards the peak of inflated expectations, at the first stage of the cycle. The paper suggests that as a learning technology then we must remember that Twitter is still relatively immature. The survey implies people are experimenting in the way that they use it. That said, the analysis does indicate a certain "buzz and excitement" around Twitter. So, given its relative immaturity as a learning technology then the challenge is to share effective practice in educational use of Twitter.

Introduction

Twitter is the technology which is currently riding high in the popularity stakes. In July, 2007, TwitDir.com identified on average every day 2000 new Twitter accounts are created [<http://twitterfacts.blogspot.com/2007/07/number-of-twitter-users.html>]. So given this pattern of exponential growth in the Twittersphere we need to focus on trying to understand what it offers as a learning technology. In terms of the Gartner Hype Cycle [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hype_cycle] then we are slowly moving towards the "peak of inflated expectations". In the knowledge that Twitter still faces the "trough of disillusionment" phase before it moves up the "slope of enlightenment". I'd suggest at this stage a better understanding of effective practice will us navigate more smoothly through the "trough of disillusionment" phase. This does pre-suppose that Twitter has a role as a learning technology. This paper will help formulate our answer to the broader question.

For those who are about to take the plunge, twitter is;

"is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send "updates" (or "tweets"; text-based posts, up to 140 characters long) to the Twitter website, via SMS, instant messaging or a third-party application such as Twiterrific or Facebook.

Updates are displayed on the user's profile page and instantly delivered to other users who have signed up to receive them. The sender can restrict delivery to those in his or her circle of friends (delivery to everyone is the default). Users can receive updates via the Twitter website, instant messaging, SMS, RSS, email or through an application."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter> (accessed 9th May, 2008).

In other words, it enables short text based communications between people in a very easy, intuitive way that uses low threshold technologies where the locus of control is with the individual.

When reflecting on my own use of Twitter then I'd suggest it ebbs and flows. I'm currently viewing it as an excellent social network. Over a relatively short time frame I observe in my own behaviour subtle changes in how I use Twitter, in terms of writing tweets and following people. This observation has been a motivation for this work.

The questions I'm asking are, how are people currently using twitter? what is shaping this pattern? how is it evolving over time? and how do people view Twitter as a learning technology?

Methodology

I've adopted various approaches to try to answer the questions raised previously. One approach (which is being reported here) has been to use an online survey. I publicised my

survey via a tweet (Twitter posting) which encouraged those who follow me on twitter to complete the survey. They were also encouraged to further disseminate the survey to those who follow them. I also publicised the survey via my Facebook account as my Twitter account automatically updates my Facebook status.

Participants

In total 12 people completed the survey. I'll admit that this is not a representative sample of the general Twitter population. However, it does give a good insight into people's habits and views. Why do I suggest this? Well, the characteristics of the respondents suggest as a group they are a relatively experienced in terms of using Twitter. They tend to have relatively long engagement with the software, they frequently update their Twitter status and have well established social networks. This supports the suggestion that although this group is not representative of the whole population, it does give a meaningful insight.

The group characteristics include;

- 80% have been using Twitter for over 4 months. While over 30% having been using Twitter for over 6 months.
- 4 people would be termed "power users". Classified as updating their Twitter status over 11 times a week.
- Each respondent is followed by on average (mean) 22 people, with the largest number being 65. While, each respondent is on average (mean) following 19 people, with the largest number being 80.

Discussion

The first point to clarify is what do people tend to tweet about? In other words, what are they trying to achieve using Twitter? To help answer this question I developed a very simple index for tweets. I classify a tweet according to the following;

- classification 1: have the specific aim of updating other people on what the person is doing
- classification 2: are designed for 1-2-1 communication, i.e., use the @username
- classification 3: are intended for personal consumption. Such as a seeding an observation or reflective idea,

The respondents were asked to identify the proportion (in terms of percent) of their Tweets by type of classification. Admittedly, there were some limitations with this approach as the classification was not clear to some respondents. While the use of an inappropriate question type in the survey meant that the percentages didn't always add up. However, the results do give a broad indication about what people tweet about. The findings are as follows;

Classification 1 - 60%

Classification 2 - 22%

Classification 3 - 7%

This illustrates that people primarily use Twitter as an outward facing communication tool to mainly update people on what they are doing. The much smaller proportion of direct 1-2-1 communication using Twitter is probably due to the very public nature of the tweet. The results also indicate people do not perceive Twitter as a personal reflective space.

So how are people accessing their Twitter account? The following responses give an indication of how people are accessing Twitter and what factors determine this pattern. The responses identified that the largest number of people (4) accessed Twitter via the Twitter web site. Although 73% (8/11) responded that they used a combination of approaches. Such as Twitter web site, desktop client and mobile phone.

An interesting response was in terms of the role of SMS notification. I assumed that due to the limiting text length combined the importance of the speed in communication then SMS notification would be very popular. However, only 4 people (36%) used text updates. When further probed it appeared that these respondents did not simply adopt a default of "all on". Instead a more sophisticated use emerged. For instance, "I switch them on and off depending on the quantity of messages and where I am", "I mostly use direct messaging for just one or two colleagues to keep in touch when I am out of the office", "just turn it on when I an away from a pc".

Another set of questions focused on how people have integrated Twitter with other software. Based on my own experience then I'd expect people to integrate Twitter with other technologies because of efficiency gains. This was evidently the case within this group. Where 90% of respondents integrated Twitter with other software. The most popular integration was between Twitter and Facebook (60% who did integrate, linked these two technologies). When asked why they thought this integration added value, then 3 people focused on efficiency, and 2 people commented about widening their audience. However, two of the respondents who currently integrate Twitter with other software were starting to question if it did add value. For instance, "I don't think it does really" and "I'm not sure yet". This anxiety reflects my own practice, and I'd suggest it signals a maturing use of Twitter by practitioners. My anxieties are based on a growing feeling that I need to differentiate my audiences (followers). This thought was addressed by asking people if they thought about the different audiences and if this influenced their tweets. It was found that 82% of the respondents agreed that when they updated their status they were conscious of the different audiences that followed them. The awareness of these different audiences influenced their updates. The following responses were typical. "I still try to be myself. I just wouldn't post my personal crises to Twitter", "do you want to tell your boss you have a terrible hangover and are off sick?" "I consider it primarily a work tool, whereas all my friends follow my Facebook page" and "there is some stuff I can't Twitter or say because I wouldn't want it to reach the wrong audience".

Given Twitter is emerging as a popular technology. I was interested in identifying if the early adopters behaviour changed over time. The response suggest an emerging trend. For instance,

9 people agreed that they increased the frequency of their number of times they updated over time. So people are making tweets more frequently.

5 people agreed that they had started to spend more time searching for people to follow

2 people agreed that they had started to stop following people

I'd suggest this illustrates over time people are experimenting more with Twitter to evaluate what it offers them. The key indicators are increased use of the software combined with a more sophisticated use (search skills and stopping following people). It would be very interesting to track this group over time to see if these patterns change. When asked if they imagined that they would be using Twitter in 12 months time, then 64% (7 out of 11) said yes, and the other 4 people said they didn't know. Interestingly, within this group no people indicated that they were likely to stop using Twitter in the next 12 months.

Finally, there is the question of the role of Twitter as a learning technology. Overall, there was little agreement on a role for Twitter within education. Infact few people answered this question in the survey. This is particularly interesting given that all the people surveyed were employed in some capacity within education. The suggestions which were forthcoming included, "social context / cohesion between students", "creating a sense of community" and "administration". This could be interpreted that the role for Twitter is to facilitate learning through its social network capability (connecting people, keeping people informed, and easy communication). As opposed to using it to create content, or for personal reflection or as part of an integrated learning activity.

Conclusion

So how do these findings help us in our understanding of Twitter? Firstly, I think it supports the view that at the moment there is a buzz about exploring the different opportunities of Twitter. I'd suggest we are in the "let a thousand flowers bloom" space. Therefore, we are not converging towards a consensus on how Twitter might be used as a learning technology. Secondly, it does highlight the need to shift the emphasis of the research towards disseminating case studies of effective practice. The publication of more rigorous evaluation of "Twitter: The Learning Technology" will in context of the Gartner's Hype Cycle allow us to reduce the severity of the "trough of disillusionment" and start moving up the "slope of enlightenment". It will also help me, the learning technologist, start to appreciate the role of this type of tool in a face to face higher education context.